



Getting organized

By Bernie Lusher

The ping pong diplomacy, or table tennis routine, took place in 1971 . . . and that seemed to stimulate activity about China around the country. By the early part of 1972, five friendship associations started up; Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago and New York.

On the West Coast, there was an early struggle between young people who had an idea that the Association ought to be a political organization promoting Maoism in this country, and using it as a steppingstone for other Maoist organizations and Mao Thought, and so on. Then there was a group, of which I was a part along with Claire (Hirsch) Frank (Pestana) and others, who thought the Association ought to have the broadest possible cross-section of the American people in it, with the long range goal at that time, of Normalization of relations between the two countries. And we felt that the only possible way to achieve that

goal was to have the broadest possible range of people that we could reach.

That struggle took place for not a terribly long period, just a few months. When the left groups saw they weren't getting anywhere, they dropped away.

At this time, we were feeling our way along: how we would get the educational message across; filing for a non-profit status so donations would be deductible; getting speakers, getting films; working out activities; etc.

Then the next major period was concerned with getting together with the other associations on the West Coast. We wanted an exchange of experiences, and to have a regional conference so we could benefit from each others' efforts. The same thing was happening in the Midwest and the East, as the people from various cities were getting acquainted with one another.

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The three regions then got together, in what we called Tri-Regional Meetings, to work similarly on the regional/national level; hammering on positions that we should be taking; our goal; how to go about it. At this time the Eastern Region had a couple of chapters from the South, then not a separate region. This period developed into plans for the First National Convention for the establishment of the national organization, over Labor Day Weekend 1974 in Los Angeles. The convention held at UCLA consisted of representatives, not individuals but delegates, from 38 associations, as I recall.

The first convention was a totally volunteer effort; of the 400 delegates that attended, all those not from this area were all put up at the homes of members, or friends of members. It was a massive effort. We felt at that time, since there was no money available to subsidize people, there were many who would have difficulty paying for hotels on top of airfare, so we began in that way.

Pestana's house was the staging area; people were driven there from the airport and then fed (there were a couple of hundred that first night), and then taken to their lodgings.

Bernie Lusher conducts an early meeting.

In fact, a group of 35 people managed and ran the whole convention . . . fed, arranged housing and chauffeured 400 people, just about. Just 35 activists did all that; I guess we were all younger then. Delegates were driven from UCLA to a swim party in Pasadena, shuttled to the Convention Center for the Han Suyin speech, and back. And we left the association with a nest egg of \$10,000.

In 1972, the first elements of a tour program were set up, through working with the Chinese Embassy to Canada.

In November, the first association delegation went to China, when the LA Association sent five people; Claire Hirsch, Amelia Sluyter, Frank Pestana, Georgia Lein and myself. A small group also went from Seattle. So by 1974, we had decided to go with as extensive a tour program as the Chinese would allow.

We met to adopt a tour program, a statement of principles and to set up a National Board with representation from the three regions. The first National Board had four representatives from each of the three regions, plus members at large. The Board then selected the officers of the Association.

In October 1974, the Board met for the

first time and decided to set up a National Office in Los Angeles. I was selected as the first national executive director of the national and we were functioning by November of '74; selling a tour program, establishing a publication (newsletter); etc.

The earliest programmatic interest was focused strongly on tourism and speaking and slide shows for local groups. At that time no one had been to China so the emphasis was to get into schools, Lions Clubs, Rotarians, and other groups who use speakers, and do these talks.

It was all new and fresh, China was in the press . . . so there was a lot of activity and excitement. We had an excellent public meeting in Los Angeles in 1973 with Dr. Victor Sidel, who had just been to China. Public meetings and prominent figures were common, with the focal point always being Normalization.

The period around 1977 was very upbeat. Normalization was in the offing, to take place in 1979. I don't think the Association did it singlehandedly but it did help establish a climate in which Normalization could take place.

Continued next page





Members of the 1975 Leadership Delegation met by Deng Xiaoping included: Bernie Lusher, Clark Kissinger, Margaret Whitman, Bill Hinton, David Nolan, Frank Pestana, and Ellen Brotsky Williams.

Organized cont'd

We had some 38 chapters and by the time growth peaked we reached over 100 local chapters and organizing committees around the country, putting on events. This was just before the commercial tour operators were able to get a foothold in China so we were the one sending people to China.

What was going on in China began to produce problems for the Association though. Mao became old and sick and the exposes about the Gang of Four began to come out. . . . Mao's death, the death of Zhou Enlai and the upheavals that followed disturbed a lot of people. We had many people who were very idealistic in their approach . . . "a new man and new woman were being developed in China, etc." and it was such a romantic period . . . the Long March, Yan'an, and the slogan "Serve the people" really appealed to us.

Although we went to China in 1972, in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, we had no idea what was really happening. It was

painted to us in rosy pictures . . . although I still feel a lot of aspects were valid. When we went on the first delegation, we had people ask us: "How can you dare go to China. Will they let you come back?" I'm talking about average people. Five years later, midway in our tour program, they were paying whatever the going rate was to be among the first to go to China. Lots of things happening in the world at that time made for that kind of change but we played a part.

But when Normalization was achieved the focal point of the Association's work changed; before that it had been relatively easy to finish every speech or talk with the benefits of Normalization for Americans. When that was achieved to some extent our purpose was lost and there was a floundering—sort of "What do we do now?"—and to some extent the Association has not found the answer subsequently. So, in my opinion, in 1984 it still remains for the Association to establish what its programmatic focal point should be. □